

Lawmakers unveil Medicare e-prescription system bills

Doctors would be rewarded for using system; error reduction sought

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WASHINGTON -- Bills introduced by two Nevadans in Congress on Wednesday would require doctors issuing prescriptions for Medicare patients to use an electronic system with the aim of avoiding dangerous errors and saving money.

"There are so many ways to mess up a hand-written prescription and that is what this is about," Sen. John Ensign, R-Nev., said at a news conference unveiling the measure.

The bill would mandate electronic transmission of Medicare prescriptions from doctors directly to pharmacists.

It would pay a 1 percent bonus each time a doctor prescribes electronically.

Starting in 2011, it would cut payments by 10 percent each time a doctor writes out a prescription.

The bill would provide payments to help doctors buy electronic-prescribing equipment, which costs about \$2,500.

Rep. Jon Porter, R-Nev., called "e-prescribing" a "necessary and constructive step to move health care into the 21st century." Porter and Rep. Allyson Schwartz, D-Pa., sponsored one of the bills.

Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass., said the Institute of Medicine has estimated as many as 1.5 million errors occur each year in prescription handling, leading to 7,000 deaths. The bill says at least a third of the errors involve Medicare patients.

"All those jokes about doctors' handwriting to some degree is something to laugh about except when you are on the receiving end," Kerry said.

Medicare errors cost the federal government about \$1,983 per person for a total of \$887 million, according to the legislation.

Matt Leffingwell, a Porter spokesman, said it has been estimated that e-prescriptions could save as much as \$50 million over five years and \$1 billion over 10 years. The savings come from not having to fix prescriptions or treat victims of errors, he said.

At a Senate Judiciary hearing on Tuesday, Joseph Rannazzisi, a Drug Enforcement Administration official, testified that the number of prescriptions in the U.S. increased 71 percent from 1994 to 2005, but that the population only increased by 9 percent.

He said the DEA supports the use of e-prescriptions but wants to ensure the electronic transmissions can be secured.